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ASSISTANT SECRETARY WATSON ANNOUNCES STOPPAGE OF WORK ON BLACKLEAF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Land and Minerals Management Rebecca Watson today announced that the Bureau of Land Management is indefinitely stopping work on an environmental impact statement examining energy production in the Blackleaf area along the Rocky Mountain Front in northwestern Montana.

The announcement means the area will not be developed in the foreseeable future. BLM will likely redirect funding earmarked for the Blackleaf EIS project to another planning project, the West HiLine EIS/Resource Management Plan.

“Clearly, development along the Front is a complex issue,” Watson said. “President Bush has met with hunters and anglers and told them there are some places that should not be developed in order to protect wildlife. The Rocky Mountain Front is important for wildlife and is of great interest to the hunting community. There is very little existing development in this area and we need to step back and look at the issue on a landscape level to be sure we conserve our resources in a balanced way.”

The National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to complete an EIS before taking any action that could significantly affect the environment. Watson said that halting work on the EIS would allow more time for all involved parties to explore alternatives that would resolve the complex issues associated with energy development in the Blackleaf area.

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Stopping the EIS process for Blackleaf also would allow the BLM to concentrate on other planning efforts in Montana that ultimately would be more beneficial in meeting the energy needs of the nation.

Marty Ott, BLM's state director for Montana and the Dakotas, said that the area covered in the West HiLine has about 850 authorized oil and gas and natural gas leases, so it is more efficient for BLM to concentrate its resources on that project. Also, October 1 begins the new federal fiscal year, and it's a logical time to reassess the agency's workload and priorities.

Discussions among the Department of the Interior, BLM and Startech have been held over the course of several months.

The EIS contractor, Maxim Technologies of Helena, Montana, will be paid for the work completed to date.

Government estimates are that federal land contains about 68 percent of all undiscovered oil and 74 percent of undiscovered natural gas in the United States. Montana is one of five states that the Department of the Interior and Energy Department believe contain about 140 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, enough to supply the 56 million homes now using it for 30 years.
